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SRI LANKA

A QUICK GLANCE

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Twenty-nine years ago, a British film unit preparing a documentary on then newly independent Ceylon - now, Sri Lanka - decided to give it the title, Ceylon: Island without Problems. In a similar vein, Ceylon's first native-born Governor General once said that in his country: "The sun rises in the morning, and sets in the evening...and it sometimes rains." Despite these assumptions of placidity, Sri Lanka, in just under three decades as a new nation, has endured food riots (1952) that led to the resignation of a Prime Minister, racial riots (1956, 1958), the assassination of a Prime Minister (1959), an abortive military coup (1962), a tradition of labour unrest, and armed revolt by young insurgents (1971). These traumatic events notwithstanding, Sri Lanka has nurtured at least one important element of political stability: the ability to change governments democratically, in the seclusion of ballot booths, without market square turbulence or the intrigue of palace revolts.

History was repeated in July this year, when the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike - the world's first woman Prime Minister - was defeated at the country's eighth general election. The SLFP, which went to the polls with 85 members in a 156-member National State Assembly, ended the general election of July 21, 1977 with a sparse eight seats, including that of Mrs. Bandaranaike. Only one other member of the outgoing Cabinet survived the avalanche. The new Government has 139 seats in a 168-member Assembly, and is led by Junius Richard Jayewardene, of the United National Party (UNP).

Jayewardene, in politics for over 40 years, was associated with Sir Percy Spender of Australia in formulating the Colombo Plan. (Canada was represented by Lester Pearson at the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers Conference held at Colombo in January 1950, when Jayewardene delivered the keynote speech formally proposing the inauguration of the Plan.) Jayewardene was a lawyer before he took to politics, and his legal background is apparent in his meticulous research and his careful use of words. He has a widely acknowledged reputation for tough decisiveness in public life. He leads a disciplined personal life, although he is by no means a grim ascetic. He has been known to cavort merrily with his three grandsons and their friends, is a charming and sociable host, and has cultivated the capacity, rare in politicians, to relax. Throughout his political life he has been supported by his self-effacing, dignified and gracious wife Eline.

Jayewardene's views on development were succinctly summed up by him when he told an UNCTAD preparatory meeting in February 1967:

> "The crux of our problem as I see it, is how are we to increase our respective national incomes, and while so doing how are we to win the race against the increase in population... Our first task is to help ourselves. We must as far as possible, by our own efforts, develop our economies to secure the maximum benefits for our people from our own resources and by our own efforts..."

In Ceylon's distant past, those efforts were directed mainly at developing and maintaining a flourishing state of agriculture. Ancient local chronicles, and commentaries by travellers from the region, have said that in pre-colonial times, agriculture dominated the country. "The tradition grew that cultivation of the soil was the most noble occupation and he who owned and tilled a plot of land was a noble birth." Rice production was the major pursuit of this agricultural community, and it was accompanied by impressive efforts to store water, and thus utilize monsoonal abundance even during times of drought.

Two systems of irrigation were widely used. In the first, an earthen dam was constructed across a river, water was stored below it, and carried along a main channel and then through numerous branch channels to the fields below. In the second, the waters of a flowing river were diverted and carried along long channels, covering many miles, into tanks (reservoirs) specially constructed in areas close to the rice fields. The earliest tanks built in 67-111 A.D. had a perimeter of three miles each, and were fed by canals 30 miles long. Over 600 miles of canals covered the country by the 12th century, all feeding tanks, some of them massive, that sustained agriculture. Many of them have survived into the present, including the picturesque Parakrama Samudra or Sea of Parakrama, which covers 5,000 acres and was built to irrigate 18,000 acres of adjacent rice land.

The major historical chronicles of Ceylon (the Mahavamsa, Culavamsa, and Dipavamsa) were written by scholar monks who recorded these acts of construction, but did not describe the technology that made them possible. It is clear, however, that the ancient people of Ceylon had mastered both the theory and practice of hydrology, geology, constructional engineering, and related skills. The use of wood to build sluice valves, the construction of symmetrical stone slabs that fitted exactly, the choice of the most appropriate sites for dam construction, and so on, all bear witness to the existence of advanced local technology.

The caste system of Ceylon also supports this view. In spite of the ugliness of its social manifestations, Ceylon's caste system has a certain logic in its origin; castes actually reflecting economic occupations - farmers, fishermen, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and so on - in ancient times. Religious buildings that have withstood the ravages of time, stone sculpture, intricate wooden carvings, and enduring temple paintings, are part of a legacy that demonstrates the technical knowledge and skill, and the artistic sense, of ancient Ceylon. Some commentators believe that the legacy has not been wisely used, however. Many modern Ceylonese have an innate talent for technology. Vintage cars that straddle Colombo's roads are kept moving by the ingenuity of local mechanics. Ceylonese construction workers are great adapters of modern technology. Although many of them have experienced only rudimentary formal education. But the skills of the country's people have not been fully tapped, which is one reason for slow economic growth. At the same time, many of the country's scientists and other professionals have chosen to exercise their expertise abroad.

Perhaps this migratory trend is also somewhat in keeping with the country's traditions. Foreign contracts were very much a part of Ceylon's life long before modern diplomacy began. The first Ceylon Embassy was established in the first century A.D. - in Rome. Subsequently, embassies were established at various times in China, in Ramanna (southern Burma), and in many parts of India. Such contacts, both official and personal, grew over the years, and today Ceylonese are to be found in universities, research institutions, medical centres, legal establishments, newspapers and radio stations in many parts of the world.

According to legend, the origin of the Ceylonese nation was also the result of foreign contact but of a different kind. The Mahavamsa says that Vijaya, the grandson of a union between an Indian princess and a lion (Sinha) landed in Ceylon with a band of followers, later imported a princess from India, and founded a new "line."

It is a fascinating story, of course, and if one discounts the frippery of the legend, it is a historical fact that around the 5th century B.C. a group of voyagers from somewhere in northern India, speaking an Indo-Aryan language, landed in Ceylon and founded the "lion race" - the Sinhalese. The Tamils, of Dravidian origin from South India, came in later. Today, the Sinhalese form some 72 percent of a population of 13 million. Other communities are Tamils - 20%, Moors - 7%, Burghers (descendants of the Dutch or Portuguese) - .03%, Malays - .03 percent, and "others" - .01 percent (all percentages rounded). Ceylon covers approximately 25,000 square miles. It is a country of geographical contrasts, encompassing a Wet Zone and a Dry Zone. It has an unusual relief, which finds the country rising in a series of steps from the coastal lowlands to highlands of over 5,000 feet.

It is possible to travel by car from hot and dusty Colombo to cool, crisp Nuwara Eliya (6,000 feet) in three hours. The countryside is beautiful, both in coastal areas that boast beautiful beaches, or up in the hills.

Ceylon's major religion is Buddhism, which was brought to the country by Mahinda, the missionary son of India's renowned Emperor Asoka. Buddhism is an integral part of the life of rural Ceylon. The pre-colonial education system was monastic, and it was at the temple that children were given their names and taught their letters. The pirivenas were seats of higher learning. It was also in the temples that the secrets of indigenous medicine were preserved. Buddhist emphasis on tolerance may have contributed to Ceylon's assimilation of parliamentary democracy. The earliest Buddhist Councils were organized very much on parliamentary lines. Each Council was presided over by the equivalent of the Speaker in a modern Parliament, and was divided into groups corresponding to today's Government and Opposition. Decisions were made by majority vote, and each resolution placed before a Council was subjected to three "readings." It is easy to see how the inheritors of this tradition could revel in British parliamentary ritual.

Ceylon was colonized by the Portuguese in 1505, by the Dutch in 1656, and by the British in 1796. Ceylon acquired independence in 1948 and declared itself a republic in 1972, when it changed its name to Sri Lanka, the name by which it was known in the very distant past.